

“A Promise Made, A Promise Kept”

Acts 4:32-5:11

Series: Living Outside the Box Week 4. Living Outside Materialism

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There are few things on earth as powerful as a promise kept.

The fire of the Civil War was officially lit on December 17, 1860 when delegates in the city of Columbia, South Carolina voted to secede from the Union. The remaining states of the Confederacy followed suit in rapid succession. A little over four years later, that bloody conflagration neared the end on February 17, 1865 when the city of Columbia was set ablaze. Some blame General William T. Sherman and the Union army which made its famous and devastating march to the sea. Others say the fire was caused by retreating Confederates who ignited supplies to keep them from falling into Union hands.

Regardless of who was responsible, the flames left annihilation in their wake. Thirty-six city blocks, one third of the city, became mute smoldering ruins. The impact of that holocaust was magnified because Columbia had no firefighting equipment. It was lost during the war. Bucket brigades were the most they could muster to fight the inferno. It took decades for that city to truly rise from the ashes.

Yet two years later, while much of Columbia still lay in ruins, a promise came from an unlikely place. New York City firemen, many of whom once marched in the ranks of the Union army, put out some of the fires of bitterness with a single gift. They raised \$5,000 – mostly from pennies - and purchased a fire wagon for their brother firefighters in Columbia. In March of 1867 a new fire truck was loaded onto a steamship bound for South Carolina. Unfortunately, on its journey south the ship went down in the Atlantic taking the fire truck to the bottom. Yet a promise made must be kept. The New York firefighters mounted another fund drive and sent a second wagon in June. The people of Columbia were so overwhelmed by this gift from their once bitter enemies that Confederate Colonel Samuel Melton made a promise on behalf of South Carolina's capital city. They would return the kindness “should misfortune ever befall the Empire city.”¹

They say there is a fraternity among firefighters. In this story, the bonds which tied these comrades together were stronger than the hatred which divided them during our nation's bloodiest war. Those northerners could have said, “It serves you right. You got what you deserved” or “We'd like to help but we have our own problems” or “Money is really tight right now” or even “Well we tried, but our gift went to the bottom of the sea. Sorry.” Not once but twice the firefighters of New York gave up what they possessed in order to bless their brothers in Columbia. It didn't come from the wealthy and well-heeled. The pennies of the common folk in the North blessed the devastated people of the South.

¹ "A Kindness Returned-134 Years Later," Building Adult Ministries (3-31-08); taken from an Associated Press story by Page Ivey.

Do you live to bless or possess? Do you live more to give or to get? Where do you fall on the scale between holding onto and handing over? The drive to accumulate possessions exerts a powerful influence over all of us. I look at my family. At one time we had one computer for all of us. Now we each have a computer. We used to have one phone. Now we each have a cell phone. We had one stereo set. Now we each have an iPod and none of them play a vinyl record...yet we still have a record collection.

Possessions usually come in a box. But materialism, the hunger to gather possessions, actually keeps us in a box. And like all the other boxes we've looked at in this series, it starts young. A mother gave her child a one-dollar bill and a quarter. "Sweetheart," the mother said, "you can place either one in the offering plate. It's entirely up to you." As they were driving home, the mother asked the daughter what she decided to give. "Well, at first I was going to give the dollar," said the daughter. "But the man behind the pulpit said God loves a cheerful giver, so I felt like I would be much more cheerful if I just gave the quarter."² Keeping possessions seems to make us happy. Losing them makes us miserable. Barbara Jones says,

I was trying to console my six-year-old daughter, who had lost her new Barbie lunch box on the way home from school. "But it's only material," I said, "And God doesn't want us to get caught up with material things." Through her sobs, she said, "But it's not material, it's plastic!"³

When we grow up it's even harder not to be a material girl or boy. Despite this down economy, with so many out of work, the internet still stokes our appetite for things. It posts the hot items we must have this Christmas.

Facebook has even found a way to make us pay money for nothing. You can play games that involve virtual farms, virtual pets, and virtual mob wars. In some of these games, a person can buy virtual goods—fertilizer or additional pets or guns. But these items don't actually exist, of course. They are just little computer pictures on the screen. Nonetheless, if they want to buy virtual tools for their virtual farms or a virtual dog collar for a virtual pet, they actually pay real money! A player sends real, hard-earned money through a credit card account. You can even buy gift cards to use in these online games. In 2009, Newsweek magazine reported the total U.S. market for virtual goods was worth just over \$1 billion—twice what it was the year before. People will spend real money for something that isn't real.⁴

Why? Possessions give us status: "You are what you drive." Possessions give us security: "Don't leave home without it." Possessions give us pleasure: "Double your pleasure, double your fun." Possessions give us power: "Just Do It!" Yet it's just an illusion. Possessions are just things. They can't really deliver any of these things. Yet we believe they can. We believe in them.

² Van Morris, Mount Washington, Kentucky

³ Barbara Jones, "Kids of the Kingdom"

⁴ Daniel Lyons, "Money for Nothing," Newsweek magazine (3-29-10), p.22

Neurologists performed an illuminating experiment. They asked people of faith to recall moments when they felt close to God – such as in prayer, worship or solitude – while they scanned their brains. Then they showed the same people stained glass, the smell of incense, and religious icons or images. In both instances the same specific area of the brain - the *caudate nucleus* - lit up. Next, the neurologists scanned the brains of another group, but this time they showed them material possessions, products considered to be "cool" brands. They found the exact same area of the brain lit up. For them, it was like having a deep religious experience.⁵ No wonder the Bible says that idolatry, substituting stuff for God, is the most basic sin. Scripture says that idolatry is adultery: it's loving stuff more than God. Stuff does not give status. Stuff does not give security. Stuff cannot save us. That's what Dan Marr found out when he went outside of the box to the Bahamas.

When I went down to the Bahamas these past two summers, the one thing that stuck out to me was the cost of materialism and how much we as a society, and even as a church, rely on materialistic items throughout the world.

My one concern was that I was going down there without my cell phone. That was the worst thing because I would be out of communication with all my friends. I thought there was no way I would be comfortable enough to leave all that behind and sit around all day talking to these people that I didn't really know that well. When I actually got down there and started working, I realized that they have nothing like we have – no computer games like X-Box and Play Station and no cell phones. They have buckets and they take sticks from trees to play on the buckets, and they're amazing at it.

When I came home, I realized that I am bored sitting at home when I have my HD TV and my X-Box and my cell phone ready to text my friends. I'm sitting there being bored, yet when I went down there, I see these kids having so much fun running around playing tag or playing with a soccer ball. I guess that was a shocking thing for me to see when I went down there – seeing how much we have and how happy they can be without any of that.

I guess the one thing I realized that made them so happy was their faith in God and their families and loved ones and how all that faith in God and their trust helped them to be the happy people that they were.

So far in our study of the book of Acts the Church is expanding and growing by leaps and bounds. Sure there has been some opposition from the religious authorities. But in a very short time the number of believers grew from 120 original disciples to over 5,000. If that is not miraculous enough, from the very start the first believers doing something rarely seen in the history of humanity

⁵ James Bryan Smith, *The Good and Beautiful Life* (InterVarsity Press, 2010), pp. 163-164

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. (Acts 2:44-45).

Nobody was in need since those who had provided for those who had not. That sounds like communism but it wasn't. There was no central government forcing you to share your wealth and possessions. Nor was it capitalism since they were not driven by greed and self-interest. It was Christ working through them by the power of the Holy Spirit. They lived not to possess but to bless.

There was one couple, however, who was still possessed by their possessions. Now a man named Ananias, together with his wife Sapphira, also sold a piece of property. With his wife's full knowledge he kept back part of the money for himself, but brought the rest and put it at the apostles' feet. (Acts 5:1-2).

This husband and wife conspired to fool the rest of the fellowship. They promised to give all the proceeds of the sale to help others. In reality, they held on to a portion of it. It turns out, they were only fooling themselves.

Then Peter said, "Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept for yourself some of the money you received for the land? Didn't it belong to you before it was sold? And after it was sold, wasn't the money at your disposal? What made you think of doing such a thing? You have not lied to men but to God." When Ananias heard this, he fell down and died. And great fear seized all who heard what had happened. Then the young men came forward, wrapped up his body, and carried him out and buried him. (Acts 5:3-6).

Three hours later, without any knowledge of what has happened to her husband, Sapphira comes in and tells the same lie to Peter.

Peter said to her, "How could you agree to test the Spirit of the Lord? Look! The feet of the men who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out also." At that moment she fell down at his feet and died. Then the young men came in and, finding her dead, carried her out and buried her beside her husband. Great fear seized the whole church and all who heard about these events. (Acts 5:9-11).

Now that was a stewardship sermon you wouldn't forget. Let me clarify a few things:

1. God was making a point not a pattern. Please do not conclude when someone dies it is because God is punishing that person.
2. The point God made was about their lying not their offering. The issue was not money. They had every right to keep the money. They sinned when they tried to fool people into thinking they were generous. But we can't lie to the Holy Spirit.

3. Ananias and Sapphira were Christians, saved by God's grace. They did not lose their salvation.
4. Above all, our security is not in stuff. We cannot hold on to anything because nothing belongs to us. Everything belongs to the Lord and one day He will ask us to turn it all back in to Him. Even our lives are a loan from God.

When you live to possess all you get is stress, distress and a mess. The only way to get out of the box of materialism is to live to bless.

First, when we live to bless we **Open Our Lives to God's Grace.**

With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. (Acts 4:33).

The reason we bless others is because we are abundantly blessed with abundant and eternal life by our Lord Jesus Christ. We don't give out of guilt. We don't give because we are paying God back. We don't give because it's our duty. We give for only one reason: gratitude. We were given the greatest gift of all – the life of God's only Son for our salvation. It's a gift of pure grace, utterly free. We can never pay for it and we don't have to. If the immense and amazing cost of that gift has not grabbed your soul, then nothing I say can convince you to give. But if that grace *has* filled your soul, then nothing can stop you from giving.

Some of you have been teetering on the edge of tithing for a long time. You know God asks us to give ten percent back to Him of all He's given us. You say, "I'd like to tithe but I can't afford it." There will never come a time when you can "afford" it. Just take the step and do it. Peter Marshall, the former Chaplain of the United States Senate in the 1940s met a man who was having trouble with tithing.

"I have a problem. I have been tithing for some time. It wasn't too bad when I was making \$20,000 a year. I could afford to give the \$2,000. But you see, now I am making \$500,000, and there is just no way I can afford to give away \$50,000 a year." Dr. Marshall reflected on this wealthy man's dilemma but gave no advice. He simply said: "Yes, sir. I see that you do have a problem. I think we ought to pray about it. Is that alright?" The man agreed, so Dr. Marshall bowed his head and prayed with boldness and authority. "Dear Lord, this man has a problem, and I pray that you will help him. Lord, reduce his salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe."⁶

I promise I won't pray that prayer for you. But I do pray that you will open your life to the incredible grace of Jesus Christ. Open your life to the One who gives your whole life to you, who gave His whole life for you and only asks you to return a tenth to Him.

⁶ Kevin G. Harney, *Seismic Shifts* (Zondervan, 2005), p. 200.

Second, we live to bless when we **Open Our Hearts and Minds to God's People**. "All the believers were one in heart and mind." (Acts 4:32). Now the first Christians didn't all think alike. They had their share of conflicts. But they were united in their purpose. They believed in the same mission: to do Good Deeds and to share the Good News about Jesus. They lived to bless people.

Today, there are many people who do not give because they do not believe in the mission of God's people. They are skeptical, even critical. One survey shows 28% of Mainline Protestants – such as Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Episcopalians – give nothing.⁷ If you don't believe in the mission of Woodside then I do not want you to give. If you are not united in heart and mind with what we are doing for Jesus, then please do not give.

But if you believe in teaching children to praise God and learn the Scriptures, if you believe in helping teens to discover that Jesus can lead them through the tempting and treacherous waters of junior high and high school, if you believe in helping adults grow closer to Jesus through Growth Groups, if you believe that worshiping God is a great way to tell your Heavenly Father, "I love you," if you believe in offering shelter and meals to the homeless, building houses in East Trenton, churches and medical clinics in the Dominican Republic, gardens and homes in the Bahamas, water wells in parched, dry Mozambique, orphanages in Zambia and a school in earthquake ravaged Haiti, then you've come to the right place. Why not join us, make a commitment and start blessing people?

Third, we live to bless when we **Open Our Hands and Give as God Does**.

No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. Joseph, a Levite from Cyprus, whom the apostles called Barnabas (which means Son of Encouragement), sold a field he owned and brought the money and put it at the apostles' feet.

It's not wrong to have possessions. These first believers were not possessed by them. They didn't claim any as their own. They did not cling or hold on to them. Instead they opened their hands. If anyone had a need, they sold what they had and gave it away. That's what Joseph did with his field. Unlike Ananias and Sapphira, he sold the land and gave it all away with no strings attached. Joseph lived to bless. He blessed so many people they actually gave him a nickname: Barnabas – Son of Encouragement – we could call him Encouragement-Boy or simply Atta-Boy. He was always going around giving everyone an Atta-Boy. In fact, Barnabas was so giving and encouraging it was he who found the Apostle Paul hiding back at home and brought him back to the ministry. Paul wrote 13 letters – most of our New Testament and started an incredible number of churches. But we might not have had any of that if it weren't for Atta-Boy. Barnabas gave the way God does: he made a promise to give and then he kept that promise. He lived to bless not possess.

⁷ Ron Sider, "A Lot of Lattés," Books & Culture (November/December 2008).

This week, take the Commitment Card in your bulletin and pray over it with your family. Open your life to God's grace, Open your heart and mind to God's people and then Open your hand and give the way God does. And as you give during 2011, you will discover the power of a promise made and a promise kept.

Remember the fire truck sent down to Columbia, South Carolina? The people there were so overwhelmed by that promise, they made a promise of their own. They would return the kindness should misfortune ever befall the Empire City. Their opportunity to bless New York came on a clear September morning. When Nancy Turner, the principal of White Knoll elementary school heard the devastating news of September 11th she wanted to find a tangible way her students could respond to the attacks. The children were too young to give blood, and no one liked the idea of simply sending money to an impersonal national fund. While searching for an idea she stumbled on the story of the fire truck given by New Yorkers so long ago. It was easy to get city leaders and the state governor, Jim Hodges, to join in. Columbia's fire chief was a New York native. The effort was renamed "South Carolina Remembers." They collected pennies at football games, held bake sales, and sold T-shirts in a drive to raise the \$350,000 needed to replace one of the dozens of New York City firetrucks destroyed on that dreadful day. After 134 years, the day to remember came and the children of Columbia kept that promise.⁸

Let's live to bless.

⁸ "A Kindness Returned-134 Years Later," from an Associated Press story by Page Ivey.